



9-2005

Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920 (Book Review)

R. Bryan Bademan
Sacred Heart University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/his_fac



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bademan, R. Bryan. Rev. of "Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920," by Gaines M. Foster. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73.3 (2005): 918-921.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu, lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu.

Book review by R. Bryan Bademan, Sacred Heart University

Foster, Gaines M. *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920*. Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2002. ISBN 0807826979

In 1887 the *Methodist Review* published an article titled “Christianity and Our National Institutions,” in which Frank Haddock outlined what must have seemed a sensible strategy to his evangelical readers for maintaining the Christian culture of the United States amid an increasingly diverse population. He urged that it was less important to preserve specific Christian civic institutions, such as the Christian Sabbath, than it was to retain the core principles upon which these institutions were founded. He thus allowed compromise with the “heterogeneous elements” of American society, “as far as this can be done with safety” (94). But “safety” was the operative word for Haddock, for he went on to insist that “it is the province of the whole body of the people to forbid such concessions if attended with danger” (94). Personal liberties and rights could and should be set aside in order to stabilize the state. Because “a democracy is its own greatest danger” (94), a ruling Christian majority carried an “imperative duty” to legislate morality for the minority. Putting his case historically Haddock urged that “there could be no better refutation of the doctrine of State Rights than the war of the Rebellion” (94).

Haddock’s essay brushes on nearly all of the central themes of Gaines Foster’s tremendously important and timely book. It frames part of the rationale for moral legislation, introduces its principal counterarguments, articulates something of the mindset of those who sought a Christian America including their willingness to make “concessions,” points to the importance of sectionalism and the experiences of the Civil War, and, finally, suggests (by its venue) the importance of evangelical Methodism to the whole story. Foster’s narrative, however, describes what Haddock took for granted, and what historians have largely overlooked: the grassroots activity Protestants engaged in to see aspirations like Haddock’s become reality. Foster provides intimate glimpses into the strategies and motivations of a phalanx of political lobbyists who shared a desire to see the federal government expand its legislative borders and move more decisively on to specifically moral terrain. Some lobbyists sought to redefine the state as specifically Christian. Others pressed, on Christian grounds, merely for an expanded moral role for the state. Though the lobbyists harkened from a range of denominational and theological backgrounds, and though they fought for a range of moral issues, their common interest in seeing the state legislate personal and social morality brought them together for roughly half a century.

Moral Reconstruction centers on the emergence of a recognizably Christian lobby in Washington, DC, in the years after the Civil War and culminating in Prohibition. Some of Foster’s subjects and the institutions they guided will be familiar to readers—Frances Willard and Ada Bittenbender of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the New Hampshire senator Henry W. Blair, the anti-vice polemicist Anthony Comstock, and Edwin Dinwiddie of the Anti-Saloon League (ASL). But Foster integrates the stories of these prominent

men and women in the lobby with others of similar influence: the Reform Presbyterians T. P. Stevenson and David McAllister, editors of the *Christian Statesman*; Reform Presbyterians H. H. George of the National Reform Association (NRA) and Wilbur Crafts of the Reform Bureau; the Methodist minister and ASL lobbyist James Cannon, Jr.; and the lecturer and lobbyist Joseph Cook. The work of these individuals, similar to the work of lobbyists today, was characterized by cooperation, tirelessness, compromise, and an overarching pragmatism. The irony that serves as the book's narrative hinge is that the mature Christian lobby of the 1910s and 1920s, finally capable of shaping legislation, found itself in the position of no longer representing the majority of Americans in its panoply of causes. Hence the Christian lobby dissipated in the immediate wake of its greatest legislative achievement, the Prohibition amendment.

The lobbyists treated in this book, like supporters of the Religious Right today, often bear the brunt of academic condescension. Portrayed as interested in little more than defending their own diminishing hold on American culture, these middle-class evangelicals tend to be seen as selfishly interested in "social control" or in fortifying and purifying their "benevolent empire." Thankfully, Foster resists such interpretations. He takes, instead, the moralists on their own terms, directing readers to consider their Christian commitment, their concerns about the breakdown of moral life in America, their new national awareness following the Civil War, and—especially—their ability to argue for the dominance of the Christian moral tradition in America. Given the divisions within Protestant ranks, however, the lobbyists' effectiveness ultimately depended on their ability to mobilize grassroots support for their specific causes. And in this project the Christian lobbyists had to work against formidable odds. Their colossal efforts were in fact so pioneering that Foster argues they must be taken into account when scholars discuss the rise of the American state.

Yet *Moral Reconstruction* is not principally about grassroots politicking; rather it is a fascinating study of the work of a cohort of Christian lobbyists who possessed a tremendous optimism about the moral potential of the American federal government. These lobbyists began by attacking what Foster calls the "antebellum moral polity" (14), a strong hesitancy on the part of federal legislators to intervene in moral politics and a preference for leaving such decisions to state and local legislators. Antebellum antipolygamists, for example, were hard pressed to persuade legislators to pass federal antipolygamy laws in the Civil War era, despite the fact that a sweeping majority of the population viscerally condemned the practice. Throughout the nineteenth century lobbyists were hard pressed to garner Southern congressional support. Southern Democrats refused to countenance any federal intervention in morals for fear that it could serve as precedent for federal intervention in slavery or Southern race ways. Although moral legislation was common on the state level, federal involvement in morality was exceedingly rare and highly controversial. One of the few pieces of legislation that passed into law, the anti-obscenity Comstock Law of 1873, soon required revision and passed because it dealt with commercial activity through the mails, an interstate activity already under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

This antebellum moral polity was weakened somewhat by the Thirteenth Amendment (passed, of course, without the South), but Foster skillfully demonstrates the persistence of the

antebellum polity into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Lobbyists sought to push forward and incorporated emancipation, or what Foster calls “the commanding precedent for federal legislation of morality,” into their appeals (24). An important early attempt was the effort on the part of the National Association to Amend the Constitution (NAAC) to write God, Jesus, and the Bible into the preamble of the Constitution, a change that would have signaled the state’s right and obligation to root its laws in the Christian Scriptures. The NAAC was an organization staffed by leaders from the tiny Reformed Presbyterian and United Presbyterian Churches, denominations whose roots can be traced back to the Scottish Covenanters (who believed that states owed allegiance to God and ought to move toward instating God’s laws as national laws).

While the NAAC and its successor, the NRA, never did get their revised Constitution, the Covenanter leadership of the organizations, especially Stevenson, McAllister, and George, provided critical direction for the Christian lobby in its early years. They spearheaded the publication of the *Christian Statesman* and worked to organize other lobbyists and organizations, such as Anthony Comstock, Joseph Cook, and the WCTU. Foster recognizes the critical importance of the WCTU to this story, an organization that during the Fifty-fifth Congress (1897-1899) sent 35% of the over seven thousand petitions on moral subjects, a percentage just behind that coming from all the individual churches of the nation (45%), with Methodists in the lead. Advocating a host of interrelated reforms—temperance, Sabbatarianism, anti-lottery—the Christian lobby worked to convince legislators in both the House and Senate that moral legislation was within the province of their jurisdiction. Still, Southerners and others interested in leaving morality with the states stymied or tabled bills. If by century’s end Washington was abuzz with the Christian lobby (and one gets that sense from Foster’s book), this lobby’s real legislative victories were surprisingly modest. A few pieces of legislation were passed for the District of Columbia, the military, the territories, and interstate commerce, but all these spheres had long been directly under the oversight of Congress. Precious little was accomplished nationally.

In the complex legislative processes that Foster so ably recounts, a couple of factors combined in the early twentieth century to make the Christian lobby suddenly effective in their effort to enlarge federal power over morality. First, the Christian lobby adopted a new professionalism and pragmatism. Under the leadership of individuals like Edwin Dinwiddie the lobbyists were able to mobilize churches and organizations in support of their causes and to develop new and effective fund-raising techniques. A second, more important shift occurred in the national base of reform legislation. More congressmen from the South and Midwest embraced causes of moral legislation. While Southerners in the nineteenth century generally opposed moral legislation as an alien intrusion into states’ sovereignty, the early nineteenth century witnessed the Southern Democrat embrace of moral legislation as a means of buttressing white supremacy. Southerners became newly convinced, in other words, that Northerners were not going to use moral legislation to prolong political Reconstruction in the South. The support of a contingent of Southern and Western congressmen was critical in getting moral legislation passed. Indeed, as Foster notes, this Southern support for moral legislation helped “earn [the South] a reputation as the Bible Belt” (7).

This coalition of Northern Republicans and Southern Democrats, united on a moral agenda, was what made Prohibition possible. By the 1910s the Christian lobby had moved away from its roots in moral reform and took on the functions of a political organization—in which the politics of compromise trumped conviction. Hence Prohibition passed less for being morally right than that it was the will of the majority. Unfortunately for the long-term viability of the amendment, the majority support behind Prohibition was already waning.

Foster's *Moral Reconstruction* will stand for a long while as the definitive work on the Christian lobby between Emancipation and Prohibition. And yet, inevitably perhaps, it leaves some questions unexplored. Most significantly, despite Foster's aim to take religion seriously, it largely elides the robust intellectual and theological context that energized the Christian lobbyists. Despite nods to the Reformed Presbyterians, Foster provides little more than a dictionary outline of their political theology. Foster's book is also replete with white Methodists. Yet Foster does not explore or even hint at the power that the Holiness movement, which dramatically influenced late-nineteenth-century Methodism, might have had on changes in Christian views of politics and society. Although he does mention in passing the political theory of Elisha Mulford and the influential social Christianity of a Josiah Strong, both of whom provided lobbyists with an intellectual framework for their efforts, little ink is spilled on explicating the complex civilizationist discourse that so engaged their minds. Christian lobbyists were not, in the end, simply committed Christians hoping to make the nation more moral. Many of them—not just the Reform Presbyterians—were also ideologues who sought a justification for and the possibility of a *Protestant* state. (As John McGreevy's *Catholicism and American Freedom* [W.W. Norton and Company, 2003] shows, this period also witnessed a resurgence of anti-Catholicism on grounds that Roman Catholicism was threatening to a good spirit of nationality). Although lobbyists had no interest in establishing a church through Constitutional revision, they were arguing that America was by virtue of its largely Protestant population and history a morally Protestant nation with attendant Protestant moral obligations.

Such concerns aside, this is a solid study, meticulously researched, and, in spite of the sometimes complex legislative details, very well written. Its two appendices provide ample statistical support for the book's many assertions about regional or party support for causes. In the end if there is a lesson to be drawn from the study, it is that the American legislative process is surprisingly resistant, even to pressures of a majority. Prohibition was passed several decades *after* it might have had a prayer.